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U.S. Skepticism Fades

Aides Agree on Bulgarian Role In Turk's Shooting of the Pope

By Charles R. Babcock
and Bob Woodward
Washington Post Staff Writers

Some senior administration aides, including ranking intelligence officials, now agree that the Bulgarian secret service aided convicted Turkish gunman Mehmet Ali Agca in the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II in 1981, according to well-placed sources.

Senior CIA officials, including Director William J. Casey, were once skeptical of the allegations of Bulgarian involvement in the assassination attempt. But they now are said to be impressed by the evidence gathered by Antonio Albano, the Italian prosecutor who alleges that the Bulgarians hired Agca to kill the pope.

"It looks substantial," said one high intelligence official. "There is too much to be coincidence." Another senior administration official with access to intelligence reports added: "There's something to it."

This is not a unanimous view in the administration. Some State Department experts still say the Italians' evidence as to an Agca-Bulgarian connection might be reflective of a drug smuggling operation that Turkish nationals run from Bulgaria.

Details from the Italian state prosecutor's secret 77-page report on the case were published last month by The New York Times and The Washington Post. The U.S. government apparently has obtained copies of the report which was filed in Italian court in May and seeks a formal charge and trial of three Bulgarians and six Turks in the alleged plot.

No separate U.S. investigation of the shooting has been attempted, the officials said. The Italians have corroborated parts of Agca's story about Bulgarian aid by tracing telephone calls, including some from phone booths.

"They have done things we wouldn't be able to do," one official said, referring to investigative methods that U.S. intelligence agencies could not easily use abroad.

Some State Department officials said they feel the Italians' evidence establishes a substantial relationship between Agca and the Bulgarians. But they said it does not necessarily follow that the contacts were to set up a plot against the pope.

Said one official, "It's fair to say there is a good deal of smoke, but there's no smoking gun. I think the Italians can make a persuasive case that there was a Bulgarian connection. Whether that was for the purpose of using him [Agca] to kill the pope, we don't know. Maybe they were keeping him paid for some other purpose. He came out of shady circles."

Another intelligence official said it also is possible that Agca was an "enforcer in the drug trade" for the Bulgarians. According to this reasoning, it would be possible that Agca was operating alone when he shot the pope.

The Bulgarian role in the drug trade has been documented several times in recent years. Last month, John C. Lawn, the Drug Enforcement Administration's acting deputy administrator, told a House Foreign Affairs Committee drug task force that DEA information "indicates that the government of Bulgaria has established a policy of encouraging and facilitating the trafficking of narcotics through the corporate veil of KINTEX," the state trading agency.

At least two of the Turks the Italian prosecutor wants to indict, Bekir Celenk and Omer Merson, have been listed as narcotics smugglers in DEA intelligence reports, according to sources.

In addition, Abuzer Ugurlu, a Turk mentioned in the prosecutor's report as having supplied Agca with a false passport, is listed by DEA as an international drug kingpin. He is now on trial in Turkey on smuggling charges.

And a May, 1984, DEA report on Bulgaria's role in the international drug trade identifies the Hotel Vitosha in Sofia, Bulgaria, where Agca stayed the summer of 1980, as a meeting place for narcotics traffickers supported by the Bulgarians.

There is no evidence in DEA files that Agca was in the drug trade, sources said.

U.S. officials and others following the case said that the Italians apparently do not have a wiretap, a witness or other evidence to show that the connections between Agca and the Bulgarians were expressly for the purpose of shooting the pope.

Nonetheless, U.S. officials seem to agree that the Italians have amassed an extensive circumstantial case based on Agca's movements, meetings, phone calls and financial transactions.

A public trial that would directly accuse Bulgarians in the assassination attempt would be explosive because of the widely held view in intelligence circles that the Bulgarian intelligence service answers to the Soviet Union.

Asked if Bulgarian sponsorship of Agca's actions would mean Soviet involvement as well, one senior U.S. official said recently, "I've been led to believe that the Bulgarian secret service is controlled by the KGB," the Soviet secret police. Another intelligence official said, however, that there are many matters in Bulgarian intelligence that the KGB "doesn't know diddly squat about."

Administration officials have declined public comment on the issue

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